DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 169 581 CS 204 768

AUTHOR Turk, Leonard
TITLE The Rocky Road to Technical Writing--Pave It With P. R.
PUB DATE 78
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (29th, Denver, Colorado, March 30-April 1, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Curriculum Development; Elective Courses; *English Instruction; Higher Education; *Persuasive Discourse; *Public Relations; *Technical Writing

ABSTRACT

Instituting a technical writing course for the first time can be difficult. English department members are apt to approach the idea with reluctance and apprehension while those in other departments tend to think of it with idealized ignorance. A public relations effort is necessary; however, such an effort involves information, persuasion, and exposure problems. Some helpful principles for use in solving these problems include dispensing correct, factual information; indicating that the course will be interesting, helpful, or in some way advantageous to the listener; being specific and concrete; and publicizing the course. Such a public relations campaign must be carried on mostly informally over coffee, at dinners, and in faculty offices. In attempting to persuade English department members to accept the program, it is best to stress specific advantages to the department. These advantages include helping majors see the possibility of employment and increasing the number of students enrolled in the department. (TJ)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Leonard Turk

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED169541

THE ROCKY ROAD TO TECHNICAL WRITING--PAVE IT WITH P. R.

Leonard Turk

I maintain that the principles and practices of sound public relations are valuable in implementing a new technical writing course--especially at a college where the teachers in the English Department approach the idea with reluctance and apprehension, and those in other departments think of it, at best, with idealized ignorance.

First, let me briefly try to overcome, as best I can, the onerous connotation that the term "public relations" has for some of you in the academic sector. Actually, public relations, take place whenever a group or an individual attempts to (a) apprise how its ideas and actions stand with the various publics with whom it comes into contact, and (b) then takes deliberate steps to persuade those publics to look kindly and sympathetically on its viewpoints and actions.

Now, these steps are what often attract criticism because they can be manipulative, and deceitful, and circumventive of the truth. But they needn't be. Public relations effort can be honest and necessary like any planned effort. In fact, P. R. is a lot like technical writing itself: it reflects the intentions of those who use it. For example, technical writing can end up providing instructions for triggering nuclear devices; or, it can help write instructions that make miniaturized motors operational in intensive care units of hospitals.

Now, I'm not tooting a horn for the profession of public relations per se. But I am going to suggest that the skillful use of a little deliberate P. R. can help to pave the way for the establishment of a technical writing program.

When I came to Radford College in the western part of Virginia two years

CS 204 768

ago, part of my appeal--aside from a shining countenance at the thought of Virginia after four years of Maine--was a solid background in the business sector and in teaching business-type English courses.

Thus the main question from the chairman--excuse me, the chairperson--was, could I, and would I, design and teach a course in technical writing?

Don't get me wrong. She was not particularly enchanted with adding technical writing to the English curriculum; she believed, however, that such a course would fill a double need--it would add muscle to the writing option for English majors; and it would offer a helping hand to technical students around the college. The course was to be an elective, offered only to students who had completed English general education requirements.

That is all that anyone knew about such a course at that time. I came away with two impressions, both erroneous. First, I took for granted that despite lack of enthusiasm for such an offering, the English Department was for the course, since, after all, it had obviously passed the recommendation of the department curriculum committee; second, I reasoned that since the department was for it, most English teachers had been pretty well briefed and knew what technical writing was and, therefore, why it was a valuable offering.

I soon found out I was wrong on both counts, and on others as well. Plenty of English teachers weren't for the course, and hardly anyone in the department knew exactly what to expect from such an offering.

In addition, the more I talked to people around the college, the more I realized that I had a full-fledged, three-pronged P. R. problem on my hands: I recognized an information problem, a persuasion problem, and an exposure problem, not necessarily in that order.

Before I provide some typical experiences, let me first present some of the P. R. principles I established for myself. Actually, these consist of the

kind of common sense thinking that anyone does who has dealt with people in any effort to get things done.

1. The information I had to dispense consisted of correct factual data about the course I was proposing, in particular, and about tech writing in general. But I made a point of remembering this: people usually are willing to accept information only for their own reasons--not for mine. Therefore, it was axiomatic that they would need to be motivated to accept my information--much as my students needed to be motivated--or persuaded, if you wish.

2. I had found that people are open to being informed if it is to their advantage; if there is something in it for them. If this idea disturbs you, try to recall just how eager you have been in the past tc listen to information about a change, that neither affected you nor did you any good.

3. Persuasion, as most rhetoric teachers know, usually consists of convincing the listener that you know what you're talking about: I knew that a good persuader argues logically, factually, and dramatically and he argues with his listener's problems in mind. Therefore, I was convinced that when I was able to persuade my listeners that I was cffering them a situation that was interesting or helpful or in some way advantageous to them, they would open like a lotus and gather in my information. Otherwise, I could not expect them to do so.

4. The information I was so eager for them to absorb would have to be concrete and specific. And this is where we English teachers have a remarkable advantage over all other dispensers of information--for, who knows the true meaning of concreteness as an English teacher knows it. Who can use the language to make exact distinctions as precisely and as accurately as the teacher of technical writing, for example.

5. Finally, I planned that when my listeners had been urged and coaxed into a likely group who felt comfortable considering information about tech writing, then and only then would exposure--publicizing of the course--make any real sense and pay dividends. Only then would faculty members and students phone up or drop in to ask questions, to discuss, or to comment on the program and how it affected them.

Only then, when the idea of technical writing had become a vital, viable reality around the school, would the campus newspaper want to write it up to point out its advantages to students. Only then would advisors urge their wards to take the course.

Thank heavens, it was easy to judge that much of the trouble at Radford College stemmed from plain ignorance about technical writing. In fact, I was to discover that even the staunchest proponents of the course were vague as to its actual virtues and limitations. Some colleagues from geography and geology would smile knowingly and nod assent over lunch. "Up technical writing" seemed to be their response whenever the subject was brought up. But I soon realized that they were wishfully--and desperately--hoping that my course would somehow magically stamp out forever the student verbal facility problem that they coped with every day of their teaching lives.

I found the fiercest pockets of resistance lodged inside the English Department. This resistance came from people who didn't like the idea of change or of relevancy, or who looked upon writing as something that threatened literature, and hence, them.

Let me give you some details.

On several occasions, shortly after my arrival, I was lectured at and picked at about literature. One colleague after another tried to determine whether I agreed that literature was not to be allowed to relinquish an inch

to anything else. I'm afraid my doctorate in literature was confusing to them. It kept me from being a clear-cut picture of wicked intent.

One senior professor came right out and flatly warned me that technical writing was a passing fancy, and he'd seen all kinds of practical courses flow through the curriculum and disappear. Technical writing, indeed!

I remember how much I wanted to assure this chap that writing about technical things was not a passing fancy. Surely I knew that, better than most people. I wanted to tell him that my company had received handsome stipends for helping petroleum engineers, for example, describe the capabilities of gas-oil separators, both to their own colleagues and to elementary school kids.

I wanted to assure him that our course would very likely help science majors to feel comfortable writing of their own fields, learning the documentation of their fields, and would familiarize them with the clearest of all writing techniques.

But at that moment, I said nothing; the time was not right. Professor Elmer wasn't about to be informed just then, and certainly not by me, someone he surely regarded as a retread from industry.

So I waited patiently for a better time, for a more natural opening. Patience, I found, was at least half the know-how of dealing with my various publics; judgment was probably the other half. It was not enough to discover what had to be done to make a public come around to my way of thinking. In this case, I knew that my colleague needed information to dispell fears and unsympathetic feelings towards technical writing. But it wasn't going to do me one bit of good to shove information down his throat until he showed some sign of wanting to swallow. Otherwise, to put it bluntly, he'd surely spit it back right in my eye--and I'd deserve it!

The natural opening came a week later. By this time, Elmer had gotten to know me a little better. We'd had a few cups of coffee together, swapped a few war tales. All in all, he was feeling more comfortable with me. Anyway, he happened to complain that kids have trouble with Wallace Stevens much more frequently nowadays. Even English majors. Stevens was too sophisticated, too compressed for lazy minds, my friend maintained.

I agreed, and honestly so, for I had run into the same problem. "You're right," I said. "Every sound in his poems works to support a meaning. Stevens demands effort from his reader--technical effort."

Elmer chuckled, and made the connection himself. "We'd better send these kids over to your technical writing course," he suggested, wryly.

There it was. Who could hope for a better opening. I commented that poets were undoubtedly the most accomplished language technicians.

Elmer got interested in that. He asked me a question here about my course, and another there. Several little conversations later, I was invited to explain to him the advantages, practical and academic, of such a course. In fact, I was able to make the point, which was a very reassuring point for Elmer, that the course was, after all, an advanced writing course. Students taking it would be involved with evaluation of the written language, just as they were in advanced composition. They would be constantly concerned with describing situations and defining terms as clearly as possible. And some of those things, such as the descriptions of technical processes, had to be as clear as a bell because in the world of work, others would depend on the words and attempt to duplicate the process described.

As he began to understand, Elmer became kindly, if never downright friendly, toward technical writing. Best of all, he was an opinion leader in the

department. Lots of other teachers listened to him and followed his lead.

I never talked technical writing at English Department meetings unless asked specific questions. I left information-dispensing to brief conversations over coffee, or at lunch. And the information I gave was always concrete.

I believe that was most persuasive to English colleagues and to those from other departments, too. My concreteness convinced them that I knew what I was talking about. I provided specific facts, figures and details. For example, when I talked of the course syllabus, I broke it down week by week; students would be examining report formats the second week; they would practice abstract writing the three hours of the third week, and so forth. I tried to talk of the course as an actuality that already existed on the earth plane; not as electrical energy in my mind.

I tried never to insist about things, and sometimes that took the strength of a martyr, for I seemed to be fair game for baiting about job talk; that is, colleagues began to connect me logically with helping English majors to find jobs. Then, they would glower that recommending English for practical purposes was unbecoming in an English Department. And I had to point out, gently, that twenty-five percent of our majors were non-teaching; that although they were enthusiastic about English, they were hopeless about what to do with English once they graduated. I explained that I felt uncomfortable lauding the virtues of a broad, humanistic English education from my position of snug job security; that technical writing, at least, provided an insight into the practical use of English and that by God, the students liked to dream on ahead and imagine what they would be able to do with the tech writing in the real world.

I reasoned that Education majors were thoroughly job-oriented from the day they knew that they wanted to be teachers. They spent months student-teaching,

yet this solidly job-oriented function was never looked at askance by anyone, including English teachers. Why then could not an English major plan for a future in business or in publishing or in public relations?

And, more to the point, I gingerly suggested at times, that tech writing was surely an honest way of raising the head count of students taking English courses; that during these difficult times for higher education, did not the English Department wish to be concerned about its majors and about helping other majors throughout the school by providing skill courses?

I could feel the tide turning in favor of the course as the opinion leaders in the department became more conversant with the specifics of technical writing and with the advantages of having such a course in the curriculum.

At the same time that I pursued the little campaign in my department, I also carried the word to other departments. And it wasn't always through chairmen, for they were too often the worst conveyers of information--especially if their jobs lay heavily upon them at any given moment. No. I spoke to everyone and anyone who might be a booster of writing. I tracked down, for example the most published faculty members, reasoning that they would be sympathetic to my course and knowledgeable dispensers of information about it--and they were. I sought out those in different departments known to give essay-type exams. And they, too, were eager, through plain frustration, to help carry the word. At one dinner party, I discovered a geology professor who had worked for Gulf oil. Since I had worked for Aramco our rapport was immediate. Luckily for me, poor student writing was a sore point with him. He's been prosyletizing technical writing ever since. At that same party, I also met a psychologist who had been a near English major. Result: sympathetic interest in tech writing and intensive exposure for the course.

So it went with other departments--geography, biology, chemistry, home economics, business, and so forth. I began to be invited to departmental meetings to describe the course and answer questions about it. For the most part, my audiences were polite. I suppose that most of them figured that any hope held out for improvement of student writing was a step in the right direction. Once in a while, though, I caught flak intended for the English Department in general. At one meeting, a biologist who was apparently disenchanted with what he saw as English Department tyranny, snarled at me: "Why in hell do students have to take three quarters of literature as part of their general education requirements? Tell me that?!

I could have backed away by suggesting he talk to the English Department chairperson; I was even tempted to send him to my friend, Professor Elmer, for an answer. The point is, the fellow did deserve an answer. He had every right to one.

I know he was expecting a typical English teacher glorification of literature--that it is a major mode of human expression and imagination; and that it enhances our condition as human beings to learn how people live. But, while such a statement is absolutely valid, I knew it would be also absolutely unsatisfactory--especially to a technical person.

So, when my biologist colleague implied that three quarters of literature were a bloody waste of time for most students, I answered him in language I thought he could understand. I felt it was important that he get a straight answer from the English Department. Besides, fifteen of his colleagues were listening intently, each a potential booster for technical writing.

First I asked, congenially, if I was right in assuming that it was a good many years since he'd analyzed a poem or a piece of prose. Thank heavens he took the bait. "What do you mean, <u>analyze</u>?" he asked, as his ear picked up

that word.

"That's what most literature teachers do, you know," I explained. "They break down a piece of poetry or a short story into its component parts to show their students how to evaluate the effort of the author."

The biologist seemed truly interested.

"Take a poem," I said. "To get at the experience in the poem, you can break the poem into sounds, imagery, into metaphors, symbols; you can search into the world of the poem to find out what the people are like, what the landscape is like, what forces are at work. You can check out who is speaking; what his or her values are; the outlook. In other words, you take the poem apart to evaluate it, to find out its worth, just as you might do with a string quartet or with a surgical procedure."

"It's the only way you can determine how close the author comes to achieving a purpose of some kind."

"My point is," I told the biologist, "the student who takes literature is being exposed to analytical and evaluative thinking. Do you know of any better training for a young college mind--whether it's through math, biology, or literature?"

All I can tell you is that my course got three medical technology and two biology majors from the Biology Department.

I must tell you of two further tilts where P. R. seemed to pay off again. One was with Journalism, a tough, doughty little department, very touchy about being encroached upon by other, bigger departments. In college curriculum committee, they challenged us, claiming we were duplicating their Trade and Technical Journalism course.

Of course, we were not. And we proved that amicably and specifically at the bargaining table. I insisted that we compare and contrast the two courses,

point for point, syllabus by syllabus. Journalism tended to talk generally. We stuck to specifics. Concrete information won out again. What resulted was a clear piecture of the English course as a writing course, the Journalism course as a focus on publication types and methods. To get the course back into the hopper fast, we even went along with two of their demands: we would not offer English 306 in the Winter quarter when the Journalism course was given; and we agreed not to use the term "technical" in our title. Believe it or not, Technical Writing became "Preparation of Professional Papers." But students, in their infinite wisdom, have already traded in that plosive title for--guess what? Right--technical writing.

The course passed College Affairs Council, our most august body, so late in the quarter that it missed getting into the schedule. Therefore, information about the course had to be communicated to interested parties quickly. The Chairperson figured that I would take care of that since I knew all about the course. I took it for granted that some automatic departmental mechanism would get the word out to everyone. That was a mistake. No one got the word out.

Therefore, the day before registration, I had to make one last P. R. rush. This time, it was pure publicity. I phoned every single person I had met and talked with about the course during the previous weeks and months. The list must have come to a hundred people.

I phoned homes and clubs. I left messages at offices, and at wives' offices. I left word with baby sitters and with old maid aunts.

When I got someone on the phone, I pitched with facts for thirty seconds. Most of those I spoke to congratulated me on the course's arrival and promised to tell students and colleagues. And they must have, because the next day the class made.

From now on, the course will have to speak for itself. If it's any good,

the students will help sell it to their counterparts. But I'm not kidding myself. Until a great, prolific department like Business makes English 306 mandatory for its 800 majors, I'll have to continue to use all the persuasive public relations in my power to fill enough seats in Preparation of Professional Papers.